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ABSTRACT

In 1991, Huntington Beach High School scarcely had a day without a fight, a theft, or vandalism. Disrespect of staff and defiance were rampant with referrals and unserved detentions backlogged. Students felt anonymous, and authority appeared arbitrary. By 1994, the very same high school was a California Distinguished School. The single most important factor was personalization. School-related state law was explained by administrators in a classroom setting. Offenses leading to detention or suspension were posted in classrooms. With fewer surprises about consequences, there was less student anger. But the major emphasis was on dealing with the students as individuals. If students were allowed to explain completely their side of the story, they accepted their consequences. Administrators avoided blame and stressed helping the students change behavior in order to reach their own goal of graduating. All freshmen with three grades below a C were unofficially "adopted" by an adult. Students not normally given public appreciation earned Improved Student and Most Improved Athlete awards. Administrators greeted students by name at the doors. Administrators led school policy discussions during lunch hours. Voluntary tutoring sessions were offered before classes started, and block scheduling allowed the teachers to know students better. Improvement culminated in the students being instrumental in establishing a state law against bias crimes in school. (RKJ)

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CREATING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

BY REBECCA SHORE, Ed.D.

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CREATING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

BY REBECCA SHORE, Ed.D.

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About the Plan

Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that utilizes private funds to create or support innovative pilot projects in education in the United States.

The Plan supports programs that are fluid and responsive to the needs of individual schools and communities rather than programs that attempt to address these needs through a system-wide process of reform. This approach allows the Plan and its program participants to circumvent overburdened school bureaucracies in order to attack the roots of problems that prevent students from succeeding or excelling in their studies.

This "grassroots" approach to educational enrichment and reform is part of a growing trend among educators, community leaders, and parents, many of whom have been frustrated by a lack of opportunities for initiatives at the local level. This local emphasis ensures that the reform measures are appropriate to the populations and circumstances in which they are developed, and that these programs benefit the school, the district and the community in significant and lasting ways.

About the Author

Dr. Rebecca Shore was a middle school and high school teacher for ten years in both public and private school settings. She has served in a variety of administrative positions at three different high schools in the Huntington Beach Union High School District for the last seven years. She recently completed a doctorate degree in Educational Administration and Policy from the University of Southern California. She has contracted to write a book from her dissertation which was titled "New Professional Opportunities for Teachers in the California Charter Schools."

Dr. Shore has been published nationally a number of times and has presented at conferences in Washington, DC, Florida, Kentucky, and throughout California. She conducts workshops as a consultant on improving school climate, transitioning to block schedules, integrating curriculum, developing career paths for students and many aspects of charter schooling.

CREATING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Foreword

According to school reformer Ted Sizer, personalization is the single most important factor that keeps kids in school. This monograph tells how the staff at one high school dramatically changed the tone on campus through a variety of efforts aimed at personalizing the school experience for students. The story covers a three-year period, 1991-1994. No one program can be solely credited with the successes realized. Instead, the sum of all of the efforts moved Huntington Beach High School from a low-functioning high school to a 1994 California Distinguished School.

Background

The climate at Huntington Beach High School in late August 1991 was far from conducive to a learning environment and light-years away from being defined as "positive." Patterns of disruptive student behavior had evolved over a period of years and student and staff morale was negative and at times belligerent. Scarcely a day went by without a fight on campus, a theft, vandalism or some type of disruption. Student disrespect toward staff and defiance of authority was rampant and referrals and unserved detentions were backlogged from the 1990-1991 school year. Many students fronted a "What are you going to do about it?" attitude openly. An air of mistrust and resentment had grown between the school administration and staff due in large part to the perceived ineffective dealing with the problematic student behavior being exhibited. Many staff members were asking the school administrators the same question as the students, "What are you going to do about it?"

Personalization is the single most important factor that keeps kids in school.

Huntington Beach is one of six comprehensive high schools in the Huntington Beach Union High School district. The district serves approximately 13,000 students but has suffered from declining enrollment since the middle 1970s. Huntington Beach High is also the oldest school, having first opened its doors in 1906. The ethnic make-up of the school had been predominantly white until the last decade. During the period that this monograph covers, the population was roughly 64 percent white, 15 percent Hispanic, 12 percent Asian, one percent African-American, and eight percent other. Huntington's Limited English Proficient (LEP) population was approximately 11 percent with 13.2 percent eligible for free or reduced school meals. According to the High School Performance Reports, 46 percent of the seniors took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the average score of which was 963, and 67 percent of the senior class indicated that they were college bound. Roughly 25 percent of seniors were enrolled in Advanced Placements classes.

In September 1991, a new principal was named to Huntington Beach High School. Jim Staunton was new to the school and new to the position of Principal, but had served in the district in other administrative positions for six years. By October 1, two rookie deans had been brought on board and the school administrative leadership team was complete: a principal, two assistant principals, two deans, and an activities director. This team will heretofore be referred to as administration. Since the deans were generally responsible for the supervision of student behavior, they are referred to as supervision personnel. Three of the six administrators were new to the school and new to their jobs.

Since the school year had begun already, and the unrest on campus among both students and staff had been building for years, this new administration was denied the luxury of proactively taking the time to set an agenda and formulate a plan. They hit the ground running and virtually every administrator was spending an inordinate amount of time every day handling disciplinary problems. Since the mode for administrators was, by necessity, completely reactionary, discussions concerning instruction or student learning were but a distant dream that no one dared mention in the present climate. The students were too dangerously close to "out of control" to even use the phrase in referring to the situation. Administrators simply checked with one another at the end of each day to be sure no one had quit and then prepared to face the anger yet to come on the following day.

Each believed that every student had an innate need to be seen, heard, and known by staff members.

No single group of students could be targeted as the primary problematic group. This was partially due to the fact that since three of the administrators were new, they did not know the students yet. Even though the teaching staff generally knew the students, the lack of cooperation between the staff and administration was prohibitive to any united effort to identify the trouble makers. However, after a few months, it became apparent that there was a mix. Some of the troublesome youths were members of minority groups, some from low socioeconomic backgrounds, some had little or no parental support, some were considering gang involvement while others had already become full-fledged members. The only two characteristics that seemed to link the problem students were: 1) They were causing disruptions during school and; 2) Most seemed to be low achievers.

In retrospect, it would be glamorous to say that the administration formulated a plan and methodically put it into place. This was not the case. What did become apparent was that the administrators, unbeknownst to even them at first, shared a philosophy with regard to treatment of and respect for each individual student. Each believed that every student had an innate need to be seen, heard, and known by staff members and that only after this need was met, could meaningful learning take place.

Ironically, it took a combination of highly suppressive measures combined with support efforts to reach a climate in which each student's experience was personalized and the school changed.

Getting Started

Initially, some semblance of "who's in charge here" had to be restored. The principal gave the two deans full authority to administer maximum consequences for behavioral offenses and all other administrators continued to place campus security as their top priority. Some examples of measures taken follow.

Early in the year, all students with overdue detention hours from either the current year or the previous school year were given one week to make them up. They were also offered a Saturday morning detention session, attendance at which would clear their detention slates completely. Parents were notified by letter that students who failed to clear their detentions by the following Monday would be suspended for defiance of authority. According to the California Education Code, the code of laws regulating schools in California, defiance was one reason that students could be suspended from school. As a means to ensure that each and every student knew exactly what was expected of them and warned of what the consequences would be for failure to comply, the deans called in the over 200 students with unserved detention in groups of six to eight and explained the plan to them face to face.

Most students believed the deans and served their detentions. However, 84 did not. On the Monday morning following the last chance Saturday detention, all 84 were suspended. (It actually took almost until lunch time to get all of the suspensions processed.) This action caused quite a stir. Many students complained. A few parents complained. Even the district office grumbled about the loss of state revenue or average daily attendance (ADA) lost by the mass suspension. But the principal supported the effort and a clear message had been sent. Students will be held responsible for their behavior.

The fighting on campus had reached dangerously unacceptable proportions by anyone's standards. Crowds had begun forming routinely around the combatants, making it difficult for supervision to break through and break things up. The delay in response due to the crowds caused several students to be seriously injured in the fights. Also, one group of students had begun participating in what they called "rat-packing" other students. Rat packing was a fight in which a dozen or more of one group of students jumped a single student. All of the random kicking and punching from all directions by the group of students made it next to impossible to distinguish exactly who was directly involved, even for the victim. This made it especially difficult to sort out exactly who should be suspended for fighting. Again, the two deans took drastic actions. A letter was sent home to parents explaining the problem and warning them that students caught standing around viewing a fight would be suspended for two days. Again, the deans used that catch-all phrase in the California Education Code allowing suspension for defiance of authority. Students had been advised by the deans of what not to do. Therefore, the suspension was for defiance. (There are no provisions in the Ed Code allowing administrators to suspend students for simply standing around watching a fight.) Supervision then purchased several Polaroid cameras and film, financed by the Student Government class. The following Friday night after a football game, a crowd

Initially, some semblance of "who's in charge here" had to be restored.

formed and a fight ensued. Every student caught on film or identified as being present by staff or students was suspended for two days. Many students complained. Some parents complained. But again, the message was clear; do not be caught near a fight.

Finding Common Ground

Throughout that first fall semester, several other impersonal and oppressive type measures were taken to get the attention of students and parents at Huntington. However, in the day to day dealings with individual students, it became obvious that many of the students truly did not know what the school rules were or what the consequences for different behaviors were prior to breaking the rules. This made it much easier for students to surrender to peer pressure. In January, administration began evaluating just how rules and regulations had been communicated to students. It was then that similar philosophies of the administrative team began to emerge and fortunately, with help from the winter school break, some badly needed time for planning and preventative action became possible.

"Fair & Firm & Clearly Communicated"

All of the administrators had been through some kind of credentialing program or taken college classes in educational leadership which instructed them that for discipline to be effective, rules and regulations had to be fair, be enforced firmly, and be clearly communicated to students and parents. The administrators assessed the situation at Huntington with respect to what the literature recommended.

It became obvious that many of the students truly did not know what the school rules were.

Each fall semester at Huntington, the rules and regulations for the school year were printed inside slick, shiny new folders in school colors with the school name and mascot on the cover. Every student in the school received a free copy at the beginning of each year. Students were being provided with behavioral expectations via a vehicle which had a legitimate academic use; rules weren't just run off on a piece of paper that would inevitably get lost or defaced or become a paper airplane. They were actually part of a useful school product.

Arguably, rules may not have been enforced firmly and consistently in previous years, but they were definitely being enforced now. Unfortunately, there was a flaw in the communication of these rules to the students. One dean recalled a visit out to the gymnasium in early October. Near the door, she noticed that the trash cans outside the gym were filled with the new folders that had been given to the students containing the rules and regulations. As the bell rang signaling the end of class, another group of students marched out of the gym and one by one, dumped the shiny new folders they had just been given into the trash cans.

Traditionally, these rules and regulations had been given out during the beginning weeks of school in the gym classes for what seemed to be very good reasons. First, the students had not received their physical education uniforms yet and were all herded into the gym to sit in the bleachers and bide time

until scheduling had settled and the P.E. uniforms were distributed. Since the students were in need of something to do anyway, and since there were so many of them all there in the bleachers at once each period, passing out the shiny new folders seemed like a perfect way to fill time.

With second semester approaching in two weeks, administration decided to try a more personalized approach to communicating the rules to students. The English department was asked to give up one class period at the beginning of the second semester so that an administrator could come into the class and discuss the contents of the folders with the students. The English teachers were agreeable. Administrators each took a different grade level - freshmen, sophomores, juniors - and the principal went to the senior English classes. A presentation (now fondly referred to as the "Why Do You Go to School?" speech) was used for openers. The administrator started out by asking the class that question. After several wrong answers like "to learn" or "because my parents make me" or "to get a good job," eventually the correct answer came out, "Because the California Education Code says you have to."

Administration decided to try a more personalized approach to communicating the rules to students.

Administrators each brought with them the 1,870 page pamphlet edition of the California Education Code to show the students exactly where many of the rules and consequences for behavior come from. Since the actual Ed Code in California is eleven volumes, it was impractical to bring the whole thing, and students found the term "pamphlet" for such a huge document humorous. Students realized that many of the rules at school were not just made up by administrators solely to make life difficult for them; they were grounded in the state laws. The speech eventually became specific to the school and included explanations of why things were they way they were. Students were lead to understand that high school was their last free gift from society, since they had to pay for any further education as soon as they left Huntington Beach High School.

The personalized environment of the classroom setting made it possible for questions and answers and discussion to follow the lecture. Every student was heard and the tone was one of teaching and learning, not warning and frightening students into submission and especially not just "filling time." At the end of each period, the administrator walked to each desk, looked each student in the eye, and personally handed them that shiny slick new folder in school colors with the rules and regulations inside. It was presented as a gift, a reminder, and a valuable resource to help keep them out of the dean's offices.

This small change in the method by which the rules and regulations were communicated to students made a tremendous difference at Huntington. No one ever saw another folder in a trash can and it was rare, if ever, that a student sent to the office for a behavioral infraction did not know what to expect in advance. For the most part, this knowledge took the anger out of the dean's office by eliminating the unknown for the students. They knew what to expect when they were called in and were not surprised by any consequences for their behavior. The change also helped form a bond or connection between the administrators, teachers, and students. Administrators were seen in a teaching role by both groups. Many of the teachers learned things that they did not know about the Ed Code and school rules. Also, after having heard the presentation over and over, they became experts in discipline themselves, enhancing the consistency with which measures were enforced. Finally, after the teachers had heard enough of

the lectures, the administrators would encourage the teachers to go have a cup of coffee, giving them a break if only for a few periods. Obviously, this was appreciated and full teacher buy-in was achieved.

The following year, this tactic was instituted at the beginning of the school year. Other departments were included. The principal went to talk to seniors in their government classes, thus integrating into the lesson, the way in which legislation is developed and how the education code comes to be in California (and giving the English department a break). A laminated poster of serious offenses and consequences taken directly from the Ed Code was posted in every single room on campus. Listed on the poster (in school colors) were the suspendable or expellable offenses. Students (and some teachers) were surprised to find that setting off firecrackers (considered by many to be a minor prank) could result in expulsion from school since firecrackers were classified as an explosive device, punishable by more than just a suspension.

Administrators at other schools and the district office raised a brow to the Huntington administrative team for, in essence, closing down their offices for the first two weeks of school to visit classrooms and discuss school rules. However, by the end of the second year, lack of communication to students about rules and regulations had been virtually eliminated and it was agreed that those two weeks were well spent. Tremendous amounts of time re-explaining rules one by one to students in the dean's offices had been saved. This was especially fortunate when, in the second year, budget cuts reduced the administrative team to only five, eliminating one of the two dean positions, and calling the remaining dean and activities director, vice principals.

Staff Development/Staff Relations

Lack of communication to students about rules and regulations had been virtually eliminated.

The combination of the hard-line enforcement of pre-existing policies and the work with students in the classrooms on behavioral expectations with the teachers present became a frequent conversation topic in the teachers' lounge. The secretaries and other classified staff handling all of the paperwork from all of the student suspensions and follow-through on serving detentions joined the buzz. "Perhaps THIS administration, however short-lived their tenure at HBHS may be, will make a difference. They certainly are coming on strong with the 'take no prisoners' approach to student behavior." All of this sparked an ever so slight ray of hope and trust between administration and staff. This spark was fanned by two additional factors.

First, when it came to students being accused of misbehaving, teachers were always right as far as administration was concerned. If a teacher said Johnny was disruptive in class, Johnny must have been disruptive in class. There was no questioning the teacher's judgment. This practice went a long way to solidify the trust between administration and staff. On the other hand, this was not the end of the story. Johnny's story of the situation was always listened to intently and discussed thoroughly in the dean's

office. So it wasn't actually Johnny who was disruptive, it was the student right next to Johnny? Well then, how did Johnny react when he was erroneously blamed? Could Johnny understand that with 38 other students in the class it was easy to understand how Mr. Brown mistook Johnny? Has Johnny's past behavior given Mr. Brown the impression that Johnny does not take his class very seriously? Could this have been a factor in the misunderstanding? What steps could Johnny take to change his image with Mr. Brown?

After every effort was made to see the situation through the eyes of the student, every effort was made to help the student see the situation through the eyes of the teacher. The conversations focused entirely on how the administrator could help Johnny to do better and move closer to gaining the ultimate goal of a high school diploma. The questioning without blaming kept Johnny in a thinking mode rather than an angry accusatory mode and Johnny felt heard. In every case, every effort was made to increase the student's repertoire of skills in dealing with different teacher personalities and teaching styles while maintaining the dignity of both the teacher and the student. And in nearly every case, any student who got to tell their side of the story thoroughly was then willing to take full responsibility for their actions and served whatever punishment was coming to them with a spirit of cooperation. The bottom line was always, "The teacher holds the key to your diploma and you have to be smart enough to get along with all of your different teachers."

In nearly every case, any student who got to tell their side of the story thoroughly was then willing to take full responsibility for their actions.

Over time, administration confirmed what they already believed. That was, treating others with respect breeds respect both in and among others. Respecting another means listening intently and supporting wholeheartedly without compromising anyone's integrity or the school rules. Nobody "gets off" but everyone is heard. Sounds utopian but it worked!

The second major development with staff was that they began to read education-related articles. The staff at Huntington was made up of veteran teachers with virtually no new teachers having been hired in over a decade. The state of California provided schools with eight days each year for staff development. Most teachers at HBHS felt that they already knew best how to do their jobs and staff development days were best used grading papers. The restructuring impetus of the late 1980s had virtually bypassed these folks because none of them were in college at that time and most had received their credentials to teach before the mandatory professional growth component had been added by the state Commission for Teacher Credentialing. So they had gotten more than a bit relaxed on their professional reading.

Three of the administrators had started doctoral programs in that first year. A fourth new administrator on the team had started a master's and was attending the California School Leadership Academy. Unlike the teaching staff at Huntington, they were involved in a great deal of professional reading and were concerned that the teachers generally felt, "It ain't broke so don't try and fix it." One administrator began creating brief letters to staff reviewing educational research. These letters, however, had a light, almost tongue-in-cheek approach to the subject matter and every effort was made to make the read-

ing easy and enjoyable. Comics were always included. Large type and colorful paper was used. At first, a few staff members would make negative comments on the letters and send them back to administration. However, over time it became obvious that most of the staff was not only reading the "missalets" as they called them but were enjoying them and even discussing their content. At a time when the overall school climate was uncomfortably negative, a little humor went a very long way. And since the real content of the memos was current educational research, the staff was learning something new about student learning (or about their own learning) and enjoying it.

The Second Year - Support and Suppression

One year, however, was not enough time to change the climate of a large, comprehensive high school.

By the end of the 1991-1992 school year, most students believed that rules would be enforced and generally understood why the rules existed. One year, however, was not enough time to change the climate of a large, comprehensive high school. Many students still harbored the resentment from past experiences and had trouble seeing school as a place that could be a pleasant place to be. In addition, other outside forces worked against establishing a positive climate. With state and district budget problems causing cuts in personnel, teaching loads in the district went up to 180 students per teacher per day from the previous 170. California already lead the nation in class size, and the Huntington district classes loomed very close to the top in the state. This increased chances of students sliding through the cracks and journeying through high school in anonymity. It also increased the likelihood that students needing extra attention would do so through counter-productive means. In the 1992-1993 school year, a number of supportive programs which helped to personalize the school experience for many students were initiated. These programs, in turn, helped improve the overall school climate.

Adopt-A-Kid

After the first four-and-a-half week progress reports came out, administration at Huntington requested a printout from the district office of all students with three or more D's and/or F's on this progress report. In addition, the teachers at Huntington were asked to jot down the names of students that they felt were at greatest risk of not graduating on time due to behavioral problems. The vice principal of supervision, school psychologist, nurse, and community outreach liaison all created "hot lists" of students who they felt appeared to need extra attention. The various lists were cross-referenced and efforts began to get to know these students by name.

First, an adopt-a-kid program was initiated by matching up adult volunteers on campus with one or two students of their choosing from the list. The goal was simply to provide a listening ear for the stu-

dent, give them information where needed, and support or advise them when asked. Any adult working at Huntington Beach High, certificated staff or classified, could participate in the program and it was very simple to implement. A memo (another somewhat humorous one) went out to all staff stating the number of students who had received three or more D's and/or F's on the first progress report. The calculation was made as to how many teachers would be lost if these students dropped out of school. Since the district had been in a state of declining enrollment for more than a decade, it was in everyone's best interest to keep kids in school (to keep their jobs!). Most, however, said that they were interested in the program solely to help children.

The adults were asked to attend one lunch meeting at which free pizza would be provided by administration. At the meeting, the daily class schedules of the adopt-a-kid at-risk students had been run off and were ready to be distributed. The schedules showed the six classes, teacher names, and room numbers that the students were taking. Forty-two staff members attended, everyone from teachers, the nurse, the psychologist, or other certificated staff, to secretaries, custodians, cafeteria workers, or other classified staff. Administration reviewed the number of students at risk of not completing high school. Since the number was far more than forty-two school employees could hope to handle, the group decided to "adopt" only the freshmen on the list. There were 81 freshmen students on the list. Most adults chose two students so the list was exhausted and all of the student schedules were passed out.

It was recommended that the adults try to schedule a time to meet with the student(s) of their choice at any time it was convenient for them. To ensure frequent contact, several of the teachers made the student their classroom aide during one class period. Classified employees such as secretaries, made them their office aide. Student aides performed functions such as making copies or answering phones, running call slips out to classrooms or helping the custodians, and generally helped out wherever needed. Since they were already failing three or more of their six classes, the decision was made to allow these students to drop one class after the normal deadline for changing classes had passed to become an aide.

To ensure frequent contact, several of the teachers made the student their classroom aide during one class period.

The students were never told that they were on any kind of an at-risk list. The adults in the program approached the students in ways that lead them to believe that they had somehow found out the student might need some assistance and just wanted to let the students know that they were there to help them. Most adults had chosen students that they knew so they did not have to stretch too far to be believable. Others had to come up with a creative way to meet their student. The concept of telling the 81 students that they were all in an at-risk group was discussed. However, it was decided that giving a negative group identity to these young students new to the school was not a good idea. (By the time they are seniors, they may be less sensitive to this, but not as freshmen.)

Two additional handouts were distributed to staff at this lunch meeting. One was a list of possible questions they could ask their student to break the ice and get to know them quickly. The second

was a schedule with the days of one week across the top and every single hour of the day down the left side. The adults could help the students find out how they were using their time by asking them to jot down their activities for a full week, every hour. Some felt this helped them get to know the students faster as well as helping the student see how little they may be studying or how much they may be watching T.V. or other activities. Overall, the adults were on their own to try and connect with the student. The primary objective was to become at least one adult on campus who was able to greet the student by name each day, and see if the student's academic performance and/or attendance improved.

The entire cost of the program was the pizza at the first meeting and more pizza at an end-of-the-year meeting. At the final meeting, stories were shared of successes and failures, what had worked and what had not. One parent sent a teacher a bouquet of flowers in thanks for the help she gave her child. Another had been given a box of chocolates. Of the 81 freshmen on the initial list, 43 improved on either their grades or attendance. Since the group was initially identified as the very most at risk of not staying in school, having over a 50 percent success rate was impressive. One student stated, "I know I wouldn't have graduated if I hadn't gotten into a 12-step program. Luckily Mrs. Altice and Ms. Martin were on to my problem early and helped me. Then I got my dad in a program and I did graduate. Just barely, but I did it!"

This program was continued the following year and saw an almost identical number of both students on the initial list and students improving their school situation by the end of the year. Again, only freshmen were targeted, but many of the original adults kept in contact with their same freshmen adoptees after they became sophomores.

The primary objective was to become at least one adult on campus who was able to greet the student by name each day.

At the same time the adopt-a-kid program began, a weekly group formed to discuss the progress of students on the list. Members of the group included the vice principal of discipline, assistant principal, psychologist, nurse, community outreach liaison and a few staff members. The group functioned much like a student study team, but the focus was not limited to special education students. The result was that all of the student services personnel kept in close communication and were able to compare notes on the various students. Prior to the formation of this group, one student may have been requiring service from several different support personnel who could have provided insight for one another had they know that they were all dealing with the same child. These weekly meetings provided that opportunity.

10 Most Improved Student Award

Huntington had traditionally selected a Student of the Month award. This was usually given to a cheerleader, athlete, club president, or some other obviously well-adjusted high school student with a high grade point average. In an effort to recognize excellence in academics and still target the at-risk group of

students, a Most Improved Student Award was initiated each quarter. Every teacher selected a male and female student every quarter to receive their award. They filled out a form for each student, writing personal comments about the student and how they had improved. These students were then called into the principal's office one by one. The vice principal of supervision and a classified employee were also present to add to the ceremony. (Many students confessed that they were sure they must be in some kind of trouble at first.)

After arriving in the Principal's office, the Most Improved Students were given a certificate, a letter of commendation for their parents, a personalized keychain with their name on it (compliments of a local business), a handshake and congratulations from the principal, and a round of applause from the small audience. In addition, the principal read the comments each teacher had made about the student's improvement. Their names were then listed in the principal's newsletter each quarter. Some of the teachers followed-up with small ceremonies in the classes from which the student received the award.

The key to the success of the assembly was the actual presentation.

The pride instilled into these students by winning this award, probably due largely to the way in which it was delivered, was remarkable. And the principal claimed it was his favorite time of the year. All around campus the keychains with the student names on them were seen hanging not-so-subtly out of jeans pockets like a medal of honor.

The school also initiated an Athlete of the Month Award. Since many of the star athletes were unable to maintain grade point averages high enough to be chosen Students of the Month, this was a way for them to be recognized as well. Their names went up on the school marquee each month with the Student of the Month names.

Anti-Violence Assembly

In late winter of the 1991-1992 school year, the principal called the administrative team together to discuss a recent rash of unusually violent events which had occurred in the community and which involved minors. In each case, some of the teens involved had just gone along for the ride and had no intentions of becoming involved in such serious criminal acts. The principal asked the administrators to discuss possible preventive measures to keep Huntington students out of these situations.

An assembly was planned. The principal had collected headlines from the local papers reporting the series of events. Some depicted dramatic pictures of teenagers behind bars. The principal opened the assembly with a presentation reviewing the recent events, complete with overheads. A panel had been convened to discuss the recent increase in violence in the community. The panel included a juvenile court judge, a probation officer, a local detective, local police officers, and a mother whose son had been killed by gang gunfire. Each panel member discussed their role in the juvenile justice system and the mother shared a moving story of her senseless loss.

The key to the success of the assembly was the actual presentation. Rather than herding the 2,050 strong student body into the gym for one class period, a more intimate period-by-period assembly took place in the school auditorium. Students attended with their social studies classes. Since the groups were small, approximately 200-300 students per period, and the auditorium created a much more formal atmosphere, students took the subject seriously and group behavior was not a problem. A microphone was set up at the front of the auditorium for questions and answers at the end of each assembly. As a result of this candid discussion, students were empowered with firsthand knowledge about how illegal and violent acts are dealt with in the justice and penal systems. They were informed of exactly what happens to teens in the unfortunate event that they become mixed up in the juvenile justice system. Finally, they were touched by a personal account of the pain of senseless violence from a mother who had lost her son.

A lunch meeting was held every other Thursday for any students who wanted to come in and discuss school policies.

Feedback from the social studies teachers the following day was very positive. Many of them had continued the topic of discussion in the even more intimate setting of their own classrooms the next day. Some students even commented to administrators, "We should have more assemblies like that." The unanimity of agreement by both students and staff that the assembly had been worthwhile and meaningful, further built the trust within the school community.

Green Ribbon Campaign

Following the aforementioned assembly, the principal initiated a green-ribbon campaign to promote awareness of and express a no-tolerance position toward school violence. The program was structured after the red-ribbon campaign well known in schools as part of an anti-drug awareness program. Every Tuesday, staff and students would wear green ribbons to show their anti-violence stance. The PTSA (Parent Teacher Student Association) made little green ribbons with straight pins in them for the students (a nightmare for any administrator in charge of supervision - the creative ways in which students utilize straight pins are endless).

Ribbons were not passed out en masse. They were placed in a large glass fish bowl outside the principal's office. Students were informed about the ribbons and the campaign through the daily bulletin, but had to come to the principal's office to request one themselves. The response to the voluntary program was phenomenal. Within a month, students were wearing the green ribbons everywhere from their hair to their shoelaces. Again, administration felt that it was not the ribbons that attracted the students, it was the manner in which the campaign was presented that made it successful.

Student Forum

In the 1992-1993 school year, a student forum was created. A lunch meeting was held every other Thursday for any students who wanted to come in and discuss school policies. The vice principal

of supervision chaired the meetings. The group met in the principal's conference room and talked about activities and ideas or voiced complaints. Some rules were laid down to prevent the sessions from becoming too negative. First, no teachers could be mentioned by name. Also, no negative statement could be made without a positive statement along with it. The forum never drew more than fifteen or twenty students, however, it was another vehicle by which students could be sure that they were heard and their opinions were expressed. By having the vice principal chair the meetings, the message was clear to students that their ideas were valued and worthy of administrative time.

Writing A Bill

Early in the fall 1993 school year, a disturbing flyer was found on campus. It purported to declare "open season" on blacks for hunting. While there were only three or four of them discovered, one found its way into the possession of several black students. The student population at Huntington was only one percent African American, however, the students and parents of that one percent were understandably concerned and upset. They were all at the door of the principal the very next morning demanding a conference.

The principal met with and listened to the group. They realized that the perpetrators were probably not students on campus. If they were found to be students, though, they realized that there were no provisions in the education code to protect students from hate crimes, racial statements, and overtly prejudicial actions.

The principal matched up the concerned students with two social studies teachers, who proceeded to write a bill.

The principal called a local assemblywoman and discussed this situation. He asked if it was conceivable for these students to write a bill for the legislature to consider adding this to the education code and would she back it? She agreed. The principal matched up the concerned students with two social studies teachers, who proceeded to write a bill. They met in the mornings before school and sometimes at lunch. In essence, the bill said that the students and staff of Huntington Beach High School support state and local legislation that will specifically name hate-related crimes on public school campuses as punishable by suspension and or expulsion.

On September 29, 1994, Assembly Bill 2752 by Assemblywoman Doris Allen was signed into law by Governor Wilson. The bill empowered school principals to suspend students for intentionally engaging in harassment that disrupts class work and creates a hostile educational environment. The local press and television stations came to campus and interviewed the staff and students. One article read:

> Orange County has recently witnessed a rise in serious, oftentimes violent, harassment on its school campuses. Several students at Huntington Beach High School decided something needed to be done and formed a cultural awareness group. Rather than reacting violently, the group made a concerted effort to offer intelligent and well thought out solutions to the problems and recruited Assemblywoman Allen to champion their cause. Students from the school, as well as their

principal Jim Staunton, went so far as to travel to Sacramento on two separate occasions to testify before legislative committees earlier this year.[1]

Brandii Marks, a recent Huntington Beach High School graduate and one of the students who requested the bill, stated, "This bill is very important; it assures us of a safe and non-hostile learning environment and protects the rights of the students who are being harassed."

"Assembly Bill 2752 is a prime example of today's youth gone 'right,' and how an appropriate response to a problem can yield tangible and practical legislation," Assemblywoman Allen noted.

Not only had the staff and students become empowered by the incident, they had actually changed state law. This incident, which initially dealt a tough blow to the improvement in school climate that administration had worked so hard to achieve, ended by uniting the school even more. All students were proud to be at Huntington.

Rewarding Good Behavior

In the fall of the 1992-1993 school year, the administration and the disaster preparedness committee planned and conducted the annual disaster drill. This year, the drill fell on an unusually hot day. As always, the entire school was evacuated and all of the students and staff stood out on the baseball field for the better part of an hour while the search and rescue committee went through every classroom.

Not only had the staff and students become empowered by the incident, they had actually changed state law.

In previous years, the conclusion of the drill was followed by a deluge of behavioral referrals to the vice principal of supervision's office. Added to the usual student misbehavior on the field during the drills, there were thefts from classrooms, fights in the halls returning to classes, calls from the local shopping center complaining that students were out of class and littering, and on and on. This particular year, the vice principal of supervision headed to the office to prepare for the onslaught. Immediately following the drill, no referrals were brought down. An entire period after the drill, there were still no referrals, calls, or any other complaints. By the end of the day, there had still not been a single report of any type of student behavior problem as a result of the drill. The vice principal alerted the rest of the administrative team. The group decided that something had to be done in a meaningful way to let the students and staff know of this successful disaster drill. The PTSA was meeting that very afternoon. The administrators went to them and relayed the story of the phenomenal student behavior during the drill. That night, the PTSA purchased tootsie pops for the entire student body, sorted them into bags by homeroom, and typed a note of appreciation for the outstanding behavior to be read in each homeroom as the pops were passed out. The following day at nutrition break, students everywhere had white sticks poking out of their mouths, but it did not keep them from expressing their gratitude to administrators that they saw out on duty.

1. News release of Marc Burgat for California Assemblywoman Doris Allen. September 29, 1994.

It should be noted that this was an impromptu reward for outstanding group behavior. It was not held out as a bribe to solicit the behavior. It was administered sincerely and received sincerely. This seemed to signal a turning point for the climate at Huntington.

Later in the semester, a spirit assembly was planned for the gymnasium. After all of the rally groups had performed, a guest speaker/entertainer had been programmed to speak to the student body on multiculturalism. The students filed in, the spirit groups performed, and then - a principal's nightmare come true - the guest speaker failed to show up. There were 2,050 students and the entire school staff sitting anxiously in the school gymnasium with nothing to do. Darrell Stillwagon, the veteran, well-loved activities vice principal started a "wave" of arm movements going around the gym. Then he told a couple of clever jokes. The students participated. They understood the predicament and rather than taking advantage of the faux pas to create pandemonium, they cooperated. The students were complimented profusely by the principal at the end of the period and the assembly was dismissed without incident. It was then that the staff knew a major change in the student attitudes had taken place.

Administrator Visibility

It was then that the staff knew a major change in the student attitudes had taken place.

Back in fall 1991, it was critical that all administrators were out on patrol on campus before school, after school and during lunch. This was not necessarily intended to be a proactive measure. It was simply an effort to be able to get to the next fight faster. However, after a few months passed and the campus began to settle, the habit of being out and about campus by administration continued. Administrators greeted students in the mornings and said good-bye in the afternoons. They accompanied their comments with a friendly smile and a wave, not the body language of a SWAT team out to catch students breaking rules. Over time, as administration began to get to know more and more of the students by name, they greeted them by name. On Thursdays, administrators would remind students to wear school colors on game days, and on Fridays, commend those that had. One administrator would give an impromptu pop quiz to students walking through the parking lot on details of the next sporting event and offer a tootsie roll or small hard candy as a reward for correct answers. Where's the big game tonight? What time does it start? Who are we playing? Who's our quarterback? etc....

At the end of the year in 1992, one administrator got a letter from a student expressing how "cool" they thought it was that the administrators were out greeting the students in the mornings and afternoons. The student had no idea that the administrators were there for any other reason.

Block Schedule

After two years of these types of efforts, the climate at Huntington Beach High had noticeably improved. However, many staff members attributed one specific change in the 1993-1994 school year to be the most influential of all. As the climate had improved and the staff read more and more literature

on school reform, a grassroots movement emerged proposing to change the daily class schedule to a block schedule. Since teachers had no control over the size of the 180 student load each teacher was responsible for, they tried changing the context in which they saw those 180 students. With block scheduling, teachers saw only two or three classes a day but for longer periods of time, thereby reducing the daily load to a number closer to the 80 that school reformer, Ted Sizer recommends. The longer blocks of time with the same students promoted a more personalized environment. Teachers also expressed delight over only having to see the more difficult students three days a week instead of five.

No one can be certain which of all of these efforts was most responsible for changing the climate at Huntington Beach High.

The staff also instituted a tutorial period at the beginning of the block days, 30 minutes during which any student with a question could go to any teacher for one-on-one help. While the staff were all in their classrooms during tutorial, attendance at tutorial for students was voluntary. Athletes missing class could come during tutorial to make up tests. Students with health problems could use tutorial to catch up. Compared to the 54 minutes of rushing through school each day, the tutorials and block scheduling was a dramatic departure from the past.

Combined with this increased personalization in the classrooms, the day to day campus climate changed as well. Prior to changing to block schedule, teachers and students had only six minutes to rush from class to class. With the block schedule, there was a break of some kind after each class. The day began with tutorial, followed by the first block. The first class period of block was followed by a 15 minute nutrition break. Next came the second block. Then came lunch. And then the final block class. Consequently, there was never a time in the school day when anyone, students or staff, were in a hurry. The six minute rush between classes to go to the restrooms, go to lockers, and get new lessons on the board vanished. In fact, Huntington was able to put an end to the locker ordeal completely since students no longer needed books for every class every day. All of the supervisions problems and bookkeeping and filing associated with lockers left as well.

Results

No one can be certain which of all of these efforts was most responsible for changing the climate at Huntington Beach High. However, everyone noticed the change. Kathy Morris, a special education teacher commented, "I hadn't felt safe at a school assembly here in 14 years until now." Breck Nichols, science teacher stated, "This is the best behaved group of students I've seen here in 18 years."

The change was also evident in suspensions. By the end of the 1994 school year, Huntington had the lowest suspension rate and expulsion rate (only one) in the entire district. Of the students on the adopt-a-kid at-risk list, 51 percent improved their grade point averages in both 1993 and 1994. In addition, during the 1993-1994 school year, the list itself was reduced by 50 percent right from the start.

When the first list was generated that year, the Vice Principal was sure that such a reduction in the list must be due to some mistake in reporting, so she waited until the next grade list came out to begin the program. She used the 9-week reports rather than the 4-week progress reports. Again, there were half as large a number of students at risk than the two previous years. In retrospect, the staff believes it may have been due to the block scheduling and tutorial periods. Principal Jim Staunton said, "The tutorial period allows for every student in the school to get one-on-one help four days a week. The block schedule helps the teachers get to know the students better which helps the students feel more comfortable about coming in for help during tutorial." Student Rachel Morse said, " I know I never would have made it to my senior year without the school going to block. Heck, I spent tutorials finding a place to live most of the time! In my freshman year, my mom was driving me all the way from Costa Mesa every day and I just couldn't get to first period. Then when she moved out-of-state in my junior year, I was stuck. Thanks to my friends and some of the staff members at Huntington, I made it okay."

The 1994 senior class at Huntington gave their school the highest rating in the entire district.

Every spring in the district, all schools have their senior classes fill out an anonymous survey covering all aspects of the school year. The district compiles the results and distributes it to all of the administrators. The 1994 senior class at Huntington gave their school the highest rating in the entire district. This hadn't happened in anyone's twenty year memory! Test scores also rose, probably a reflection of the greatly improved tone of the campus.

To top off the three year effort, Huntington Beach High was named a California Distinguished School for the 1994 year. Student behavior at all of the school events was the pride of the district. Even graduation was celebrated as the ceremony that it should be. Students were obviously proud of themselves and their school. Administration flooded the local media with the Distinguished School award and heralded the news proudly on the school marquee throughout the year. Many new community partnerships were formed, including a joint project between the school and the city to construct a new skateboard park in conjunction with a stadium/city beautification project. Students worked with the city council to draw the blueprints. In addition, a $250,000 donation came in which allowed the school to rebuild the aging track to state-of-the-art standards.

All in all, the Huntington Beach High School of 1991 was completely forgotten in the pride of the Huntington Beach High of 1994. All of this was accomplished through a commitment to personalize the school experience for the students at Huntington.